PATTERNS OF POWER · AN ESSAY

The Note Comes Due

A pax raises a population above what its ground can naturally carry, and every soul above the ceiling lives on coordination: a note, secured against the peace. War between hierarchies is the commonest event that calls the note — and the payment, the record shows wherever composition can be measured, dwarfs the battles by an order of magnitude

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An essay on a debt

The Claim, Stated for Testing

The second inquiry of this project concerns order among hierarchies — what exists between durable hierarchies, since no apex stands above them — and the commissioning insight behind this essay states the inquiry's core in four moves, which the essay first formalises and then, because the last move contains an empirical claim, takes to the record for testing.

First: wars are, overwhelmingly, contests between durable hierarchies — which is to say between their apexes and elites, fighting over succession, position, transition and surplus — and not crusades of common people for causes. The causes are real to the common men who carry them; an earlier essay in this collection established that the believers' sincerity is load-bearing and that mobilisation cannot run without it; but mobilisation is not initiation, and the project's files contain no major war begun by a peasantry and very few not begun by an apex solving an apex's problem under a word the population already believed. Second: a *pax* — an extended peace across a field of hierarchies — is usually the residue of that competition ending, in one of two ways: a single hierarchy wins (the hegemonic pax: Rome's, the caliphate's, Spain's, the Ming's) or the contenders reach a stalemate stable enough to price (the balance pax: the parias market, the Concert, the long truce). It is, as the insight says plainly, a terrible way to arrive at peace — the road there is paved with the dead of the competition — and it is, on the record, the only way large fields of hierarchies have ever arrived at it. Third: the pax, however bought, *compounds*. Stability breeds refinement: secure roads breed trade, trade breeds specialisation, specialisation breeds surplus, surplus breeds administration, thought, sanitation, granaries, law — and populations grow, as populations always grow, to the new ceiling the coordination has built. And fourth — the move this essay exists to weigh: when the pax breaks, the deadliest thing that happens is not the fighting. It is the *reconciliation* — the insight's word, and the right one — between the population the coordination was carrying and the population the bare ground can carry; and that difference, paid in famine, epidemic and flight, is the worst part of the wars: the metabolic note, called in.

The essay's contribution is to give the fourth move its accounting. The metaphor first, because the insight chose it precisely. A note is a debt instrument: principal, security, and a holder who may call it. A pax that lifts a region's carrying capacity writes exactly such an instrument — every person alive above the ground's natural ceiling is principal, the security is the continued operation of the coordinating machine, and the note grows, silently, with every peaceful decade, because the population always rises to the ceiling and the ceiling

is made of coordination. The better the pax — the denser the trade, the finer the specialisation, the larger the cities — the larger the note; civilisation's success and its catastrophic potential are measured in the same units, and the second inquiry's grimmest theorem is only this arithmetic stated aloud: the trigger of a war is the elites' business, but the *kill* is the note, and the note is held against everyone.

The Ledger

Does the record bear it? The project's method requires the claim to be tested where composition can actually be measured — wars whose dead can be sorted into the sword's column and the note's — and the measurable cases, ancient and modern, return a verdict of unusual consistency.

The Thirty Years' War is the classic entry because early modern Germany kept registers. Three decades of warfare by every major power in Europe, on German ground, produced combat deaths on the order of four hundred and fifty thousand — and total excess deaths the scholarship places between four and a half and eight million, fifteen to forty per cent of the population of Germany depending on the estimate adopted, with the worst-trampled territories, Württemberg and Pomerania among them, losing half or more. The sword's column, that is, holds something like five to ten per cent of the ledger; the rest is the note: typhus, plague and dysentery travelling with the armies, and famine travelling behind them, as forces that the period's fiscal systems could not pay learned to *be* the extraction system — foraging, requisition and plunder converting the agricultural coordination of central Europe into the armies' metabolism until the civilian one collapsed. The armies did not kill eight million people. They broke the machine that was carrying eight million people above the ground's bare yield, and the difference was reconciled — the insight's word again — in the bodies the registers record.

The An Lushan rebellion, the ledger's most notorious entry, earns its place for a subtler reason, and the essay handles it with the care current scholarship demands. The Tang census of 754 counted some fifty-three million souls; the count of 764, after eight years of civil war, found under seventeen million; and the difference — thirty-six million — has circulated for a century as history's largest war toll. The modern demographic literature has corrected the reading: much of that collapse is not the population dying but the *registry* dying — the imperial apparatus losing, in the war, the capacity to find, count and tax the people it had governed, while millions more fled south beyond its sight. The correction is sometimes presented as deflationary. Read with this essay's instrument, it is the finding itself, twice over: the real dead of the rebellion — battle, massacre, and above all the famines and epidemics of a north China whose canal-borne grain coordination had been severed — still number in the millions; and the census collapse measures, with terrible precision, the other half of the same event: the coordinating machine's loss of its own senses. A state that cannot count its people cannot move grain to them, and the two failures are one failure. The entry stands — smaller than legend, and entirely metabolic.

The largest entry in the ledger this collection has already audited at length: the Americas after 1492, where every serious reconstruction, whatever its contested baseline, finds a collapse on the order of ninety per cent in a century, with the visible violence the smallest of three engines and the compounding of pathogen and broken subsistence — the note of two continental paxes, Aztec and Inca, called at once — doing the rest. The fitna of al-Andalus and the Imjin War sit beside it, registers permitting: Cordoba starved of the coordination that had fed it; Korea's post-war cadastres finding a third of the taxable land of the pre-war kingdom. And for the modern instrument — the case where the composition was measured by survey while it happened — the record supplies the Democratic Republic of Congo, 1998 to 2007: the International Rescue Committee's

mortality surveys estimated five million four hundred thousand excess deaths across the war decade, the top killers malaria, diarrhoea, pneumonia and malnutrition — in the study authors' summary, easily treatable and preventable conditions, lethal through the collapse of health systems and the disruption of livelihoods — with deaths from violence itself a small fraction of the total, and two million of the excess deaths occurring *after* the formal peace, the note continuing to amortise years after the swords stopped. (The IRC's figures were later challenged — on the pre-war baseline mortality assumed, not on the composition; even the study's critics locate the dying in disease and hunger. The dispute is about the note's principal, not about what currency it was paid in.)

And the mechanism has a control case, which this essay almost stumbled over and the framework demands be entered: the note can be called *without any war at all*. The Chinese famine of 1959–61 — seventeen to thirty-six million excess deaths by the demographers' methods, the worst famine in the human record — occurred in profound peace: no invasion, no rebellion, no siege. The coordination itself was broken from above — procurement quotas set against harvests that existed only in falsified reports, an information system punished into lying upward, the granaries exporting while the villages starved — and the population that the system had been carrying was reconciled to what the broken system could deliver. The case proves what the war cases together imply: the kill mechanism is coordination failure as such; war between hierarchies is merely its most reliable cause. The verdict on the commissioning claim is therefore returned in full: wherever the dead can be sorted, the metabolic payment exceeds the combat trigger — usually by something near an order of magnitude — and the worst part of the wars is, exactly as suspected, the note being paid.

Who Fights, and Who Pays

Now join the fourth move back to the first, because together they state the asymmetry this essay was commissioned to expose. The wars that call the note are initiated, with the rarest exceptions, by apexes — succession crises, transition windows, elite surpluses venting, the standing business of this collection's volumes — and fought under mobilising words the populations sincerely carry. But observe the two ledgers. The apexes wager their *positions*: thrones, provinces, dynasties — stakes that are real and that they chose. The populations stake their *carrying capacity* — the invisible principal of the note, accumulated over generations of a peace they built and enjoyed but did not govern — and they are not consulted, because the note does not appear in any council's deliberations: no apex in the record ever tabled, beside the war plans, an estimate of how many of its subjects lived above the ground's bare yield on the coordination the war would break. The peasant of Württemberg in 1634 and the farmer of Hebei in 758 died of decisions made three levels of hierarchy above them, in a currency no decision-maker had priced, for stakes they did not hold; and the elites whose contest called the note survived it, in the main, as elites do — ransomed, married off, reconciled at the congress. The legitimating narrative tells the common man the war is his cause. The accounting shows the war is his *invoice*. Both are true at once; that is what the word is for.

The Discipline, Held

The finding sets the second inquiry's permanent bind, and the essay closes by refusing, one more time, both of the easy exits. If the pax's note is what kills, the pax is simultaneously the gift and the bomb — and the Tacitus discipline this project carries everywhere applies with full force in both directions. The reading that dissolves order into racket — *they make a desert and call it peace, therefore the peace was always the desert* — forgets what the note's principal *is*: people, alive, by the million, who on the bare ground would never

have been born or fed; the pax's benefits are not propaganda, they are the population itself. And the reading that licenses order at any price — the conqueror's syllogism, *order is necessary, therefore my order is necessary, whatever it costs to impose* — forgets who signs the note and who pays it, and that the dead of the imposition are as real as the living of the peace. The entanglement does not resolve. The project holds it apart, permanently, as method.

One counter-position, held at the close. Industrial modernity, the objection runs, has changed the ratio: the twentieth century's great wars killed by shell, bomb and extermination apparatus at scales that crowded the note's share of the ledger — and it is true that where industrial states kept their coordination running under fire, the metabolic share compressed. But examine where the twentieth century's dying actually massed and the mechanism reappears intact: the siege of Leningrad's hunger, the famines of Henan and Bengal in 1943, the epidemics and starvation that took the majority of the Soviet Union's and China's tens of millions — the ratio compressed exactly where coordination held and exploded exactly where it broke, which is not a refutation of the mechanism but its cleanest restatement: the variable was never the weapons. It is the machine behind the men. And that observation points the essay's last sentence where the second inquiry lives: the present world order — whatever else it is, and the project has called it a loaded phrase and meant it — is the largest pax in the species' history, carrying eight billion people on a planetary web of coordination above any conceivable natural ceiling; which is to say, the largest note ever written, secured against a peace whose holders are, as they have always been, the contending apexes of durable hierarchies, solving their positions' problems with the materials at hand. The note's history is the strongest argument on earth for tending that peace, and the strongest argument on earth for never letting its holders tell you what the word peace means. Tested — never revealed.

A Note on Sources

An essay's sources can be stated briefly. The Thirty Years' War figures — combat deaths on the order of 450,000 against total excess mortality of 4.5 to 8 million, German population losses of 15 to 40 per cent with regional extremes above half — are the ranges of the standard scholarship (Wilson, Pfister, Franz; the Britannica and economic-history syntheses), given in the text as ranges. The An Lushan census figures and their correction — the registry collapse distinguished from mortality — follow the modern demographic literature (Fitzgerald's classic critique and the recent demographic-research reassessments). The Congo figures are the International Rescue Committee mortality surveys (2000–2007), with the baseline disputes (Human Security Report) flagged in the text. The Chinese famine figures — 17 to 36 million by excess-death methods — follow the census-based demographic literature (Coale, Ashton, Banister and successors). The American, Andalusi and Korean accountings are documented, with sources and contested baselines, in the volumes of this collection where each appears. The pax mechanism, the note instrument, and the two-violences theorem belong to the Patterns of Power project and its second inquiry, whose commissioning insight this essay tests; its conclusions are held, like everything the project holds, as tested, never revealed.